

UP TO AND INCLUDING HER LIMITS

For two string players

Adam Overton, July 2005 (rev. 7)

Dedicated to Carolee Schneemann

Composed for and commissioned by April Guthrie and Cassia Streb

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Some Notes

- The instructions in each movement outlined below for Performer 1 and for Performer 2 should be performed simultaneously.
- Movements should be separated by short, comfortable pauses with durations to be determined by the performers.
- A *Statement of Significance* should be interpreted as *something worth saying*. These decisions are to be made independently by each of the performers, with or without consultation, beforehand or spontaneously, whichever comes most naturally; such decisions, however, should not be changed during the performance. One's basis for these decisions can range from chance or superstition (the arbitrary) to taste, politics, or profundity (value judgments) - both routes momentarily cast a glance at one's own personal gravity.
- A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech. When asked to speak or sing a phoneme from a word, the performer will isolate and articulate each individual, unique sound shape that the mouth makes, one at a time as if in ultra slow-motion. Oftentimes this will mean sounding out each letter of a word, but other times some words may have more or fewer sounds depending on the combinations of the sounds actually produced when speaking normally. When asked to sing these phonemes, one will most certainly come across certain unsingable, toneless attack sounds (called fricatives, such as 'k' or 't'), which should simply be sounded and extended with the breath (e.g. 't' equals 'tsssss...' or 'thhhhh...').
- Performers should become as familiar with the piece as possible by rehearsing *just enough and not too much*. In fact, performers may decide that certain portions may not even need to be rehearsed at all before the performance. They should of course be comfortable enough to progress from movement to movement without hesitation or lengthy consultation of the score and it would be ideal if the performers could memorize the piece. In rehearsal the performers may want to focus primarily on making sure they are comfortable executing all of the prescribed actions and techniques, and especially on how to balance the attention required to do so while simultaneously observing the pulse, breath or blinks without affecting these natural rhythms. It is important to note, however, that when mistakes of focus or control are made, *the performer should not become distraught or disheartened* - instead, such lapses should be gratefully greeted as a depiction of a very personal mental boundary or cycle period, and hence as yet another biological process adding increased depth to the performance at hand. So once again, practice your part just enough, but not too much...

I

Setting

Performer 1 lies facedown on the floor prepared to do some pushups, eyes peering straight down. Performer 2, meanwhile, lies faceup on top of Performer 1, head to head, feet to feet, back to back, eyes looking straight up, while holding her instrument on her abdomen.

Performer 1

Performer 1 proceeds to do a pushup, lifting herself and Performer 2 off the ground. She holds herself up briefly, perhaps for the duration of one breath, and then lets herself down slowly. While lying on the floor between pushups, she hums her highest pitch possible at a comfortable, low volume for the length of each exhale. Whenever she blinks, she very quickly opens and then closes her mouth, allowing the hummed tone to briefly 'escape.' After resting for five hummed breaths, she ceases humming, performs another pushup, and continues this process until she has twice found it impossible to continue.

Performer 2

Performer 2 observes the natural rhythms of her breaths and blinks as she lies atop her partner, her eyes directed to the ceiling. Careful not to interrupt these natural rhythms, she smoothly plucks string combinations on her instrument according to the following criteria, allowing the strings to ring out and decay naturally:

- For each blink she plucks String I (the highest string)
- She signals the beginning of each inhale by plucking Strings I & II together
- She signals the beginning of each exhale by plucking Strings II & III together

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SUMMARY

- Performer 1 -- Pushups -- do 1 then rest for 5 breaths -- stop after 2 failed attempts
-- hum highest pitch between pushups -- while humming, quickly open mouth for blinks
- Performer 2 -- FaceUp w/ Instrument
 - Blink = Pluck (I)
 - Inhale = Pluck (I + II)
 - Exhale = Pluck (II + III)

II

Setting

Both performers stand an arm's-length apart gazing into each other's eyes. They each comfortably hold their instrument in front of and parallel to their bodies, perpendicular to the floor. Before the movement begins, Performer 2 has thought of *something worth saying* - the following actions should not proceed until she is ready to begin.

Performer 2

While holding her instrument in front of her, Performer 2 checks her partner's pulse at the neck with an outstretched arm held perpendicular to the floor. She continues to do so until it is absolutely impossible for her to hold up her arm any longer, at which point she then performs the same pulse-checking action with her other arm extended, continuing until that arm wears out as well. Meanwhile, using Performer 1's pulse as a rhythmic guide, she repeatedly yells the first phoneme from her statement as short bursts of sound with each heartbeat and only advances on to the next phoneme when Performer 1 blinks; if she finishes her statement before the end of the movement, she wraps back around to the beginning to repeat it. She also marks each of Performer 1's blinks with a very loud plucked string that slaps against the fingerboard; which string to pluck is determined by and then plucked by the hand that is currently holding the instrument: left hand plucks the lowest string, right hand plucks the highest string. The movement ends when Performer 2 has worn out her second arm. She may or may not have finished (or repeated) her statement.

Performer 1

While Performer 1 is letting Performer 2 observe her pulse and her blinks, she stands very still and repeatedly holds her breath for as long as possible. Between these breathless periods she is silent and rests for as long as she needs to, breathing normally; while holding her breath, however, she begins to play her instrument. She holds her instrument in front of her near her body with her right hand, and at a medium loud volume bows two adjacent strings simultaneously as slowly and as evenly as possible with her left hand. One of the strings is an open tone, but the other is held down and treated with a staggered portamento or glissando that only advances step by step up and down the string whenever Performer 2 blinks. She should move slowly from low to high and back again, going only as far as her fingers can reach and basing her increments on whatever movement feels most natural, paying no attention to intonation or scalar temperament. She continues this portamento action even when not playing to take into account the blinks that might occur between held breaths. She repeats all of this until both of Performer 2's arms have worn out, signaling that the movement is over.

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SUMMARY

- Both Standing
- Performer 1 -- bow in left hand -- while holding breath, bows two strings smoothly -- one string open, the other a staggered portamento with each of partner's blinks
- Performer 2 -- arms extended checking pulse of partner until tired -- yells phonemes of Statement of Significance -- loud pluck with each blink

III

Setting

Performer 1 reclines either on the floor, on a bench, or in a chair with a slanted back so that she can easily lay back and have her head and eyes pointed up toward the ceiling for the duration of the movement. She holds her instrument on her abdomen so that its scroll is pointed toward her head, its body parallel to hers. She thinks of or has already thought of *something worth saying*. Performer 2 stands or kneels directly over Performer 1 and they peer into each others' eyes. One of Performer 2's arms hangs down comfortably so that Performer 1 can easily grasp it at the wrist to check its pulse.

Performer 2

Performer 2 leans over her partner in as comfortable a position as possible, looking down into the other's eyes, and, for the duration of the movement, attempts to cry with the hope of possibly dripping some tears into the eyes of Performer 1. Her instrument is on the ground to her side, and Performer 1 below her is checking her pulse at the wrist. She focuses only on her crying or on whatever motivations she might be envisioning to enable or expedite the act; however whenever she catches her mind wandering back to the piece at hand, or to thoughts about the audience or performance in general, or she experiences any other large mental distraction or impasse, she loudly plucks a single string on her instrument with her available hand. She continues this process unhurriedly for as long as it takes.

Performer 1

While reclining and checking Performer 2's pulse, Performer 1 lightly strums her instrument in rhythm with her partner's heartbeat. Whenever she herself blinks she sounds a phoneme from her Statement of Significance by singing or speaking it very smoothly at, or slightly above, the volume of her strummed instrument. Each sound lasts for about the duration of 1 to 2 heartbeats. She repeats the same phoneme over and over until she imagines that a minute's time has passed, at which point she then continues on to the next phoneme. If and when she makes her way through her entire Statement of Significance, she then wraps back around to the beginning to repeat the process.

Ending

The movement ends when Performer 2 has finally managed to land some teardrops in or near her partner's eyes. As soon as a tear has landed, all sonic actions prescribed above cease immediately; Performer 2 may then take as long as needed to finish crying while the two remain in the same position. Once she is done, the two performers move unhurriedly to get seated for the final movement; in the process, neither performer wipes their faces and instead lets whatever tear residues are present to drip and dry naturally.

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SUMMARY

- Performer 2 cries into Performer 1's eyes, Performer 1 checks Performer 2's pulse
- Performer 1 -- strums with partner's heartbeat -- sings Statement of Significance as phonemes with each of her own blinks -- repeats each phoneme over 1 minute's [imagined] time
- Performer 2 -- cries -- loud pluck with each distraction

IV

For Both Performers

Performers I and II now sit across from one another in a standard but comfortable playing position, gazing into each other's eyes. After a moment of rest and when ready, they each begin *playing something worth playing*, together or independently of one another, something spontaneous and totally unrehearsed. Each performer stops whenever she is done.

When both performers have finished, they each take a deep breath and then leave the stage together.

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SUMMARY

- Seated facing each other
- Play something worth playing...
- Leave together